

REDUCING RISK

SUPPORTING YOUTH IN NORTH DAKOTA

A NORTH DAKOTA KIDS COUNT! ISSUE BRIEF!

VOLUME 1, NUMBER 4

The Issue: Reducing Risk

During the 1990's a record number of studies took place to examine the status of youth in our nation. A new decade in a new century is here and more studies will be conducted.

How many studies will it take to provide enough data to take action? What type of definitive youth study is needed to move us in the direction of fewer teen births, drop outs and deaths? Research provides a guide for family members, educators, policymakers, and community leaders. But all the research in the world will not bring about change...people taking action bring changes.

There are many bodies of research that have been cited as key to understanding the status of youth. Two stand out in our region: The Search Institute's list of assets, deficits and risk behaviors; and the Family Risk Index produced by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The Search Institute data review positive and negative influences on youth outcomes. The Family Risk Index presents data on children with a high-risk profile using six measures of vulnerability.

This Issue Brief provides a summary of both bodies of research and related North Dakota Kids Count! data. Taken together, this information can help guide discussion and decision making focused on providing the supports our youth need to grow into successful adults.



External Assets

- 1 Family support
- 2 Parents as social resources
- 3 Parent communication
- 4 Other adult resources
- 5 Other adult communication
- 6 Parent involvement in schooling
- 7 Positive school climate
- 8 Parental standards
- 9 Parental discipline
- 10 Parental monitoring
- 11 Time at home
- 12 Positive peer influence
- 13 Involved in music
- 14 Involved in school extra-curricular activities
- 15 Involved in community organizations or activities
- 16 Involved in church or synagogue

Internal Assets

- 1 Achievement
- 2 Educational aspiration
- 3 School performance
- 4 Homework
- 5 Values helping people
- 6 Is concerned about world hunger
- 7 Cares about people's feelings
- 8 Values sexual restraint
- 9 Assertiveness skills
- 10 Decision-making skills
- 11 Friendship-making skills
- 12 Planning skills
- 13 Self-esteem
- 14 Positive view of personal future

Search Institute:

The Search Institute surveys students in grades 6-12 in order to identify assets and deficits in student's lives which influence their ability to make positive choices. The more assets present in a youth's life, the more likely they will experience positive outcomes, while more deficits predict more challenges to achieving positive outcomes.

The research also examines how respective assets and deficits are linked to 20 types of behaviors which compromise student's health and jeopardize their futures. Recommendations for families, schools, churches and communities are included in search materials as a way to promote asset - building behavior.

Assets are factors that promote positive teen development and are categorized as internal or external. These assets equip adolescents to make wise choices. The average student has only 50% of the external assets and 60% of the internal assets identified by the Search Institute. As youth get older and face tougher choices, the number of available assets tends to decrease.

Deficits are factors inhibiting healthy teen development. They include influences which limit access to external assets, blocking development of internal assets and promoting risky behavior choices. Deficits are liabilities. A list of 10 deficits are associated with risk-taking behavior. Only 8% of all youth surveyed report none of the 10 deficits, and nearly half of the surveyed students report 3 or more deficits. Gender differences indicate that girls are more likely to experience physical abuse, sexual abuse and stress while boys are more likely to develop self-serving values, and to resist pro-social values.

Every teen faces some adversity and many difficult choices. Mistakes are made and adults need to understand that learning to make good decisions and coping with results of their decisions is part of the adolescent phase of development. But too many deficits or negative life experiences in a row can be more than any teen can handle. What do we do? First, support any actions in your community that reduce the potential for deficits and increase the potential for assets in every teen's life. Second, understand that teens are resilient and can learn from their mistakes as they grow into adulthood, but they need access to the assets that promote resiliency. Search Institute research tells us what teens need to grow into responsible adults. Adults need to take action to support teens as they grow and provide access to the assets promoting resiliency.

Deficits

- 1 Alone at home (2 hrs. or more per day without an adult)
- 2 Hedonistic Values (student places high importance on self-serving values)
- 3 TV overexposure (student watches TV 3 hours or more per day)
- 4 Drinking parties (student frequently attends parties where peers drink)
- 5 Stress (student feels under stress or pressure most or all of the time)
- 6 Physical abuse (student reports at least one incident of physical abuse by an adult)
- 7 Sexual abuse (student reports at least one incident of sexual abuse)
- 8 Parental addiction (student reports a parent has a serious problem with alcohol or drugs)
- 9 Social Isolation (students feels a consistent lack of care, support and understanding)
- 10 Negative peer pressure (most close friends are involved in chemical use and/or are in frequent trouble at school)

Assets that promote resiliency

- 1 Church/Synagogue involvement
- 2 School extracurricular activities
- 3 Community clubs and organizations
- 4 Parental standards
- 5 Parental discipline
- 6 Achievement motivation
- 7 Educational aspirations
- 8 Homework
- 9 Helping people values
- 10 Concern for poor
- 11 Values sexual restraint
- 12 Family support
- 13 Parents as social resources
- 14 School climate

Annie E. Casey Foundation:

In 1999 the National Kids Count Data Book featured the Family Risk Index to examine yearly changes in the percent of high-risk kids in each state. The Family Risk Index (FRI) measures how many children face a multitude of problems, which put them at an elevated risk for a variety of negative outcomes. The FRI defines a high-risk child as one living in a family with four or more of the six identified risk factors. (Listed below)

Family Risk Index Risk Factors

- 1 Child is not living with two parents
- 2 Household head is high school dropout
- 3 Family income is below the poverty line
- 4 Child is living with parents who are underemployed
- 5 Family is receiving welfare benefits
- 6 Child does not have health insurance

Any one of the risk factors increases the likelihood of negative outcomes for children. Youth who have four or more of the risk factors in their lives are most vulnerable. This body of research labels these children as high-risk children. Cumulative risk has been demonstrated to have a negative effect on a child's intelligence scores and to be associated with developmental delays and behavioral problems.

A recent study concluded that the pattern of risk was less important than the total amount of risk in the child's context. Additional studies of children at various ages have all concluded that the more risk factors, the more behavioral problems are likely to occur studies of teens indicate that among 16 and 17 year olds, those with three or more disadvantages of the type measured in the FRI are much more likely to develop problems. It's important to remember that one risk factor alone is not a sign of immediate problems; it's the combination of several risk factors that result in increased risk to youth.

Changing the prospects for vulnerable children ultimately means changing the circumstances of their families and communities. A majority of the studies in the 1990's and the beginning of this century point to the fact that children continue to face risk factors and that multiple risk factors for children and teens is a serious issue. What is the status of youth at risk in North Dakota? What are the changes taking place within the families of vulnerable youth? If changing the prospects for youth means changing the family circumstances, does North Dakota have a clear picture of the challenges affecting families and what can be done to reduce the numbers of vulnerable youth and families?

National data versus North Dakota data:

According to the Casey Foundation study, nationwide there were 7.1 million children growing up with four or more risk factors in 2000. These children represent 10 percent of all children. This was down from 13 percent in 1990. North Dakota reported 7 percent in 2000. Louisiana ranked highest with 19 percent and South Dakota ranked lowest with 5 percent. Children in large cities and rural areas were also found to be more likely than those living in suburbs to be in the high-risk category.

Who are the 7 percent at risk in North Dakota? What other data do we have available about at-risk youth in North Dakota?

- 22 percent of North Dakota children live with parents who do not have full-time, year around employment.
- Over the past 10 years, North Dakota has experienced a 38% increase in the percent of families with children headed by a single parent.
- 31 percent of North Dakota youth under 18 are living in working-poor families (employed parents with family income up to 150% of federal poverty guidelines which is \$17,650 for a family of four in 2001) compared to 23 % nationwide. This is a significant factor related to the issue of low wages for many jobs across the state.
- The median income for North Dakota families with children under 18 was \$30,020, according to 1999 Census data. Estimates for 1998 indicate a median income for families with children at \$38,600, compared to \$45,600 nationally.
- Over half of North Dakota's 53 counties have child poverty rates exceeding the state average of 16.8% with 24 counties having rates between 17.6% and 27.8%.
- Out-of-wedlock births to teens ages 12-19 accounted for nearly 8% of all live births in 1999.
- The number of dropouts in grades 9-12 increased 7% between the 1998-99 and 1999-2000 school years. Between 1993 and 1999, the number of North Dakota children in foster care increased 19% from 1,441 to 1,716. Of children in foster care, 35% have needs requiring residential placements.
- The number of child abuse and neglect victims decreased from 7,341 in 1998 to 7,074 in 1999.
- The number of special education students considered seriously emotionally disturbed increased 41% between 1995 and 2000.
- North Dakota is identified by a national study (Beeson & Strange, 2000) as one of seven states where there is an urgent need for explicitly rural education policies in order to ensure the state's educational performance and the continued success of its students.
- The number of children eligible for Medicaid has increased from 18,275 to 22,431 between 1996 and 1999.

Policy Implications

Data regarding North Dakota youth living with risk factors is abundant. As communities and government entities address the needs of youth living with risk factors, there is a need to engage people in conversations which will lead to some new thoughts and approaches. There is enough information to conclude that North Dakota is a resource-poor state with many miles between activities of interest to all youth. The following implications emerge:

- Media attention lends a negative slant to challenges facing youth. But it is the responsibility of adults to create environments that will provide opportunities for positive outcomes. What systems for ongoing evaluation and attention to the needs of youth are in place in your community?
- There's nothing for kids to do. This is a common phrase in many parts of the country among youth. Again, youth are responsible for their behavior choices, but what types of activities, events or programs are available for youth in your community to provide a variety of options and accommodate the variety of interests among youth? Not every teen likes sports or singing in the choir. It can be a major challenge to provide a variety of options to youth in rural areas, especially when participation means driving a distance and a teen may actually increase their risk factors by excessive driving, or be tempted to drive distances with friends while consuming alcohol.
- It is essential to figure out ways for youth to have high-quality experiences in a variety of interest areas. This is as essential for teens during the adolescent phase of development as being exposed to a variety of stimuli during the first years of life has proven to be for brain development in the early childhood phase of development.

Think About It:

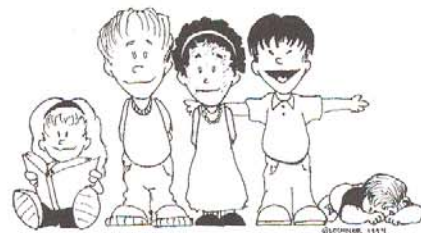
In order for youth to grow to their full potential, we now understand that they need a variety of experiences that will foster their growth. Recent research indicates that certain types of experiences are more beneficial than others in enhancing each person's development through self-discovery and learning in the bigger world. All youth need opportunities to have optimal experiences.

What does this mean?

It is not necessary to travel to Europe to have an optimal experience! This means that a teen may identify something that is of (1) high interest, (2) has potential for building high-quality skills and (3) poses intellectually challenging experiences for a teen. This can be accomplished in many ways such as mastering a musical instrument or academic subject; participating in 4-H, Scouting or community volunteer projects; or accomplishing a skill for a hobby such as skateboarding and hiking.

There is a strong connection among activities or experiences that meet these three standards. The end result is that a person develops an enhanced sense of self when the experience provides these opportunities and this drives the person to want to continue having these experiences. If a teen never or rarely has an opportunity to benefit from these types of experiences, how can they develop a desire to continue to work toward the goal of creating a better sense of self for their environment?

This conclusion regarding the need for optimal experiences among youth is similar to the conclusion found in the early brain development research field. It is key for a young child's brain to be exposed to a variety of experiences which open their thinking and increase their knowledge base of the world around them. If a young child is not provided this opportunity at an early age, we now know that making those connections at a later age is more difficult and sometimes not possible.



Final Thoughts...

There remains a significant number of youth living in families with four or more of the risk factors identified in the Family Risk Index. Too many teens have deficits that outnumber assets, and they struggle to find opportunities for optimal experiences in their schools and communities.

North Dakota has invested in many key issues for our state such as economic development, technology and infrastructure. Has North Dakota provided similar attention to the topic of youth and families at risk? The Bottom Line: Creating community networks of support that ensure families the resources to surround youth with assets and experiences which enhance their ability to reach adulthood successfully is critical for North Dakota. Youth need optimal experiences to develop a greater sense of self and to develop to their full potential. Get involved in discussions and provide the leadership in your community to assess and address the issue. Be part of the solution for youth in your area.

Summary

This publication provides the most recent information available, combined with a challenge to each citizen of North Dakota to do what he or she can improve the well-being of the state's children. Whether you are involved at the local, county, regional, state, or national level, you can take the first step to study the issues related to children and bring your information and ideas to decision makers at any level you feel you can make a difference.

References

This is a publication of North Dakota Kids Count!

- 1 Benson, P. (1994). *The Troubled Journey: A Profile of American Youth*; Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.
- 2 Csikszentmihlyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*; New York: Harper & Row.
- 3 North Dakota Kids Count! Fact Book (2001). Grand Forks, ND: North Dakota Kids Count!
- 4 O'Hare, W. & Reynolds, M. (2001). *High Risk Kids In America During The 1990s*; Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation.

*The work of North Dakota KIDS COUNT! is generously supported by:
The Annie E. Casey Foundation
Dakota Medical Foundation
North Dakota Children's Services Coordinating Committee*

North Dakota KIDS COUNT!
P.O. Box 7090
University of North Dakota
Grand Forks, North Dakota 58202-7090

**Phone: (701) 777-4086
or (701) 777-4916
Fax: (701) 777-4459
Email: hn3808@handsnet.org**